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# **Needs Assessment and Development of a Training Program for South Carolina Conservation District Commissioners**

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By: Marc L. Cribb  
Program Manager  
Conservation Districts Program  
South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

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## **I. Problem Statement**

In South Carolina, there are 230 individuals serving as Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners (Commissioners). These 230 elected or appointed persons are public officials who are charged by state law to direct a soil and water conservation program at the local level. These individuals, 5 in each county of the state, volunteer their time and expertise to carry out their duties. In order to be most effective, Commissioners should be knowledgeable of their duties and responsibilities that are established in the Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law, Section 48-09-10. This law also establishes the relationship between the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the conservation districts. Among duties and powers of the DNR, is the responsibility for organization and assistance to conservation districts. Therefore, training for Commissioners could be developed and implemented by the DNR. In addition to training the current commissioners, a training course is needed because there is a continuous turnover in individuals who served as Commissioners due to elections, retirements and other causes. The results of this turnover are that new commissioners are in need training on the authority, duties and responsibilities of their positions. The training may also include emerging natural resource management issues, which are evolving as the state is becoming more urbanized. Currently there is not a permanent, standardized training program for Commissioners that will develop leadership skills and orient and educate the individuals as to their duties and ethical responsibilities. This project will attempt to (1) Identify the need for training; (2) Identify topics which should be covered in the training program and (3) Create an implementation and evaluation plan for the training program.

Several customer groups are impacted if Commissioners are uninformed or inactive. First, the public is short changed if the conservation districts are not providing the programs/ services needed and are not responsive to the land users and operators and the community as a whole. Conservation districts are subdivisions of state government and Commissioners are public officials and therefore are accountable to the taxpayers of the state to carry out their duties under the law. If the Commissioners are not effective in providing leadership and guidance to the public on natural resource issues, then the question can be asked, "Why do we have conservation district commissioners?" In addition, the DNR is more effective in carrying out its mission as the principle advocate for and steward of the state's natural resources when the Commissioners are dynamic and engaged.

In the early 1930s, along with the greatest depression this nation ever experienced, came an equally unparalleled ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. Following a severe and sustained drought in the Great Plains, the region's soil began to erode and blow away, creating huge black dust storms that blotted out the sun and swallowed the countryside. Dust even sifted into the White House and onto the desk of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Because of this natural disaster, Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority. Congress realized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would guarantee the success of conservation work on private land, since nearly three-fourths of the continental United States is privately owned. In 1937, President Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation that would allow local landowners to form soil conservation districts. The South Carolina Soil and Water Conservation

Districts Act, Title 48 Section 9-10, signed by Governor Olin D. Johnston April 17, 1937, enabled the state to create what are now 46 conservation districts<sup>1</sup>. The movement caught on across the country with district-enabling legislation passed in every state. Today, the country is blanketed with nearly 3,000 conservation districts. The law directs Commissioners to (1) conduct surveys, demonstration projects and investigations on soil erosion, flooding and water use (2) implement soil and water control measures (3) develop comprehensive plans for soil and water conservation and for the prevention of soil erosion and flooding, and (4) cooperate with and enter into agreements with landowners and agencies. As public officials, Commissioners are required to comply with several other state laws, such as the State Ethics Act, State Election Act, and others.

The Soil and Water Conservation Districts Law, Section 48-9-20 states “It is declared, as a matter of legislative determination [that] all lands of the State are among the basic assets of the State and the preservation of these land is necessary to protect and promote the healthy, safety, and general welfare of its people”. The Declaration concludes by stating “the policy of the General Assembly to provide for the conservation of soil and water resources of the State, thereby to preserve natural resources. The mission of the DNR is to serve as the principal advocate for and steward of South Carolina’s natural resources. DNR is mandated to assist and cooperate with conservation districts in carrying out any of their powers and programs, Chapter 9; Section 48-9-290. Training Commissioners on their duties and responsibilities as natural resource leaders will help the DNR in meeting Strategic Goal 1, *Enhance the agency in addressing*

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<sup>1</sup> Keepers of the Land A History of Soil and Water Conservation Districts in South Carolina

*natural resource issues* and Strategic Goal 4, *Enhance public trust and confidence in the agency*<sup>2</sup>.

## **II Data Collection**

The main goal of the project data collecting was to determine training needs through a needs assessment survey of Commissioners and from focus group of DNR staff that work with Commissioners. The first data collected was a survey of Commissioners representing 33 of the 46 Conservation Districts at a facilitated planning meeting held July 30, 2007. At this meeting, the group, using Nominal Group Technique, indicated that training of Commissioners was the number 3 challenge. (Attachment A) The next data collected was through the “Needs Assessment Topic Survey for a District Commissioner Training Program” (Attachment B) developed using a structured brainstorming method. The brainstorming team consisted of the 15 DNR Conservation Districts staff who are assigned to work with the Conservation District Commissioners as a major part of their job duties. This method was used to identify, as much as possible, a comprehensive list of topics that are essential knowledge for a Commissioner to carry out his or her duties as a public official. The survey was sent to 24 Conservation District Commissioners, 10 percent of the total number of Commissioners, in 24 different counties. The group surveyed was selected based on varied number of years of service as a Commissioner, ranging from one to 34 years. The race-gender make up of the 230 Conservation District Commissioners is 16 percent minority. Six minorities were surveyed. The survey contains 16 possible topics which could be included in a training program. The individuals were asked to simply rank the topics from 1 to 16, with 1 being

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<sup>2</sup> SCDNR *Vision for the Future*

of highest importance to 16, the lowest rank. There was also an opportunity for respondents to recommend other topics or give other suggestions, which some did. This survey was compiled and scores ranked for each topic. (Attachment C). The second component of the data collection was for the DNR Conservation Districts staff to complete the same survey. This survey was compiled and ranked using the same method as the Commissioner survey. (Attachment D). The DNR management staff completed a third Topic Survey. This survey was compiled and ranked as above. (Attachment E). In order to analyze the three sets of data and to focus on the most important topics, I decided to use the Consensus Criteria Method<sup>3</sup>. This method compared all possible options against criteria agreed upon by the DNR management team. For this project, the options are the 16 topics rated in the Topic Survey, and the three criteria were determined to be (1) Essential Function of a Commissioner (2) Value to customer and (3) Aligns with DNR goals. Scores were calculated for each topic under each criterion, the scores were added together and totaled (Attachment F). The options were then ranked by total score with lowest scores being the highest priority.

The second goal of data collection was to research other states' training programs for Commissioners via Internet and personal contact with other state conservation agency staff. At a national meeting of the National Association of State Conservation Agencies in September, 20 states were surveyed. The states were asked to answer five questions regarding how they deliver training to the Conservation District officials in their state. (Attachment G)

The third goal of data collection was to survey and analyze existing training models and determine relevance to South Carolina. Research was conducted on five

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<sup>3</sup> The Memory Jogger Plus+: Chapter 4, Section II

states that offer online training for Commissioners and a review of North Carolina's Guidebook.

### **III Data Analysis**

The first and most important data analyzed was the Commissioner survey from July 30 (Attachment A), which indicated commissioner training as a major challenge for the group. Based on that feedback, this project was undertaken. In analyzing the data from the Commissioner and DNR Staff Topic Surveys, five of the six top rated topics were the same. This leads me to determine that there is some agreement from these two survey groups as to most important topics that should be addressed in a training course. There was however greater deviation further down the list of topics as to their importance. As an example, in the Commissioner survey, Ethics training received the lowest score, whereas in the Staff survey, Ethics training was the eighth ranked topic out of 16. In the end, the prioritization matrix using Consensus Criteria Method calculates a total score for each option, making it simple to rank the scores. Several participants suggested that some of the topics may be combined or incorporated in to other topics and there were some other topics recommended that were not included on the survey rating list. Those suggestions will be considered and incorporated in the training program as the process is developed.

The analysis of the survey of other states' training program confirmed two major points. First, most states do conduct a training program for Conservation District Officials. Twenty-two of the eighteen states surveyed currently conduct training, and two others are in the process of creating a training program. Second, the state conservation agency in the eighteen states with training programs is the lead agency to provide



training. This is an important point to justify that the Department of Natural Resources should be the lead agency in South Carolina to conduct training for Conservation District Commissioners.

Research and analysis of training programs offered by six states was conducted during this project. The Guidebook on the Law and Practice of Soil and Water Conservation in North Carolina published by the UNC School of Government was reviewed. This is an excellent publication for use in training conservation district officials. South Carolina could use a similar guide to complement our training course and we should initiate a partnership with the USC School of Government Research and Service to develop such a guide. One reservation about the guidebook is that it is unlikely that Commissioners as a whole would read and study a guidebook. A more practical solution is to use the guide during on site training and as a reference. Research was conducted on training programs offered by other states available via the Internet. Through the website [www.NASCANet.org](http://www.NASCANet.org), District Commissioner training programs were reviewed for Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, and Washington State. Some of the topics selected for the Topic Survey were gleaned from these websites. It is always beneficial to investigate other states' programs as we develop one for South Carolina.

#### **IV Implementation Plan**

Based on the survey results from Conservation District Commissioners and DNR staff, and from information and research of other state training programs, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources should develop and implement a training course for Conservation District Commissioners. The training topics should be selected from the prioritized list of topics contained in Attachment B.

Action steps:

- Hire a Program Coordinator II dedicated to Commission training.

Timeframe: July 1, 2008

Cost, \$ 45,500 salary and benefits

- Create training a course curriculum from the prioritized list of topics selected for this project and others.

Timeframe: December 1, 2008

Costs: \$5,000

- Conduct a Commissioner training session

Timeframe: January 2009

Costs: \$500

- Incorporate Commissioner training as a goal of the DNR and the South Carolina Association of Conservation Districts (SCACD).

Timeframe: April 16-17, 2008 planning meeting

Costs: no additional cost

One obstacle to implementing a training program for Commissioners is the issue of a staff position within DNR dedicated to training coordination. Currently there are four vacant positions in the DNR Conservation Districts Program, some of which have been vacant since 2003. Emphasis will continue to be placed on the importance of filling a position in order to initiate the training program recommended in this project.

There are many resources, which can be called upon to implement a Commissioner training program. Staff within the DNR can provide training on the

selected topics identified in the Topic Survey. There are other state and federal agencies that can provide trainers for other selected topics. Communication with stakeholders is vital to make this program a success. The main stakeholders in this program are the 230 Conservation District Commissioners and the public. DNR staff maintains a regular communication with these individuals via several venues, including attendance at regular meetings monthly. The DNR staff are currently embarking upon a partnership building exercise with the South Carolina Association of Conservation Districts in an effort to identify needs, compare goals and define roles for the partners. This initiative is underway. A critical aspect of this exercise will be that Conservation District Commissioner development and training becomes a priority for each partner.

As stated before, the Department should dedicate an employee to developing and implementing a permanent, standardized Commissioner Training Program. The Commissioner training component should be integrated into the Operational Plan for the Conservation Districts Program and reported in the annual performance results.

## **V Evaluation Method**

During the design and development phase of the Commissioner Training Program, a detailed assessment of knowledge gained, behavior modification, and impact of training must be developed and used to measure the impact and success of the training program. This may require the expertise of professionals in the training/education field who can provide guidance.

## **VI Summary and Recommendations**

Conservation District Commissioners, 230 individuals statewide, do not have available a training program to develop leadership skills and orient and educate these individuals as to their duties and ethical responsibilities as public officials. This is a problem because there is a continuous turnover in commissioners due to elections, retirements and other causes that results in many Conservation District Commissioners being unaware of the authority, duties and responsibilities established by State law. In addition, natural resource management issues are evolving as the state is becoming more urbanized. Conservation District Commissioners need to be knowledgeable on the emerging issues as well as their managerial and legal obligations. In order to gain that knowledge, a permanent, standardized training program should be developed and implemented by the DNR. The training course agenda topics should be essential to the function of a conservation district commissioner; be of value to the commissioner and the public at large; and should align with the goals and objectives of the DNR and conservation districts. The key findings of this project were the expressed need for training by the Commissioners and the identification and prioritization of topics to include in a training course. These topics were rated by District Commissioners and DNR staff and were measured against the important criteria. Also, several other states' training courses were reviewed and recommended as models. It is recommended that South Carolina use the assistance of the National Association of State Conservation Agencies as a source of information on training from other states and that we stay abreast of the *National District Official Accreditation Program* now under development by the National Association of Conservation Districts. ◇

## Attachment A

### SCACD Leadership Conference for Conservation District Chairs Monday, July 30, 2007

#### Outline of Facilitated Sessions

Facilitated sessions began with the following topic / question raised.

**Topic-**What are the main challenges / goals that Conservation Districts want to accomplish on a statewide basis in the next three years?

With this question in mind the group as a whole came up with the following statewide issues. The group was then given 3 votes each to cast for the most important issues.

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Total Votes</u>
Urbanization / Growth.....	24
Water Quantity & Quality .....	23
<b>Training for Commissioners.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Relationships with other governments-State, Local, & Federal .....	11
Conservation of Resources-Ag., Forest, Wetlands .....	9
State Cost Share Program .....	9
Storm Water / Water Pollution .....	8
Energy Conservation .....	3
Youth Education .....	2
Erosion Control.....	2
Recognition of Conservation Districts as Leaders.....	2
Deer Hazards .....	1
Funding.....	1
Increasing Support for Game Wardens.....	1
Pesticide Recovery .....	1
Public Relations .....	1

## Attachment B

### Needs Assessment for a District Commissioner Training Program TOPIC SURVEY

Below are 16 topics that could be included in a Conservation District Commissioner Training Program. **Please rate these 1 through 16 with 1 being of the highest importance and 16, the lowest.**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Assessing natural resource issues
- \_\_\_\_\_ Awareness of conservation programs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Duties and powers of commissioners/districts and DNR (Districts Law)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Election/appointment process and board member recruitment
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ethics (including SC Ethics Act)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Financial management (budgeting, audits, purchasing, oversight)
- \_\_\_\_\_ History of the conservation movement; local, state and national
- \_\_\_\_\_ Laws, rules and regulations related to districts (beyond the Districts Law)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Leadership development
- \_\_\_\_\_ Legal responsibilities
- \_\_\_\_\_ Legislative process and interaction
- \_\_\_\_\_ Personnel management
- \_\_\_\_\_ Policy development (includes annual and long range planning)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Proper procedure for meetings (parliamentary procedure)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Public and media relations
- \_\_\_\_\_ Roles and responsibilities of state and national association and partners

Are there any other topics or recommendations that you suggest?

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Thanks for answering these survey questions.

## Attachment C

### Needs Assessment for a District Commissioner Training Program

#### TOPIC SURVEY (Commissioner Tally)

topic						score	rank
Assessing natural resource issues						55	1
Awareness of conservation programs						62	2
Duties and powers of commissioners/districts and DNR (Districts Law)						70	3
Policy development (includes annual and long range planning)						86	4
Legal responsibilities						88	5
Laws, rules and regulations related to districts (beyond the Districts Law)						103	6
History of the conservation movement; local, state and national						108	7
Public and media relations						108	8
Leadership development						115	9
Roles and responsibilities of state and national association and partners						119	10
Financial management (budgeting, audits, purchasing, oversight)						128	11
Legislative process and interaction						135	12
Personnel management						138	13
Proper procedure for meetings (parliamentary procedure)						142	14
Election/appointment process and board member recruitment						145	15
Ethics (including SC Ethics Act)						150	16

## Attachment D

### Needs Assessment for a District Commissioner Training Program

#### TOPIC SURVEY (Staff Tally)

Topic					Rank	Score
Duties and powers of commissioners/districts and DNR					1	22
Legal responsibilities					2	50
Laws, rules and regulations related to districts					3	51
Assessing natural resource issues					4	76
Financial management					5	79
Awareness of conservation programs					6	80
Legislative process and interaction					7	99
Ethics (including SC Ethics Act)					8	101
Election/appointment process and board member recruitment					9	103
Roles and responsibilities of partners					10	107
Leadership development					11	111
Policy development (includes annual and long range planning)					12	117
History of the conservation movement; local, state and national					13	118
Personnel management					14	119
Public and media relations					15	131
Parliamentary procedure)					16	135



## Attachement E

### Needs Assessment for a District Commissioner Training Program

#### TOPIC SURVEY (Management Staff)

topic						rank
Duties and powers of commissioners/districts and DNR (Districts Law)						1
Leadership development						2
Election/appointment process and board member recruitment						3
Legislative process and interaction						4
Legal responsibilities						5
Laws, rules and regulations related to districts (beyond the Districts Law)						6
Awareness of conservation programs						7
Assessing natural resource issues						8
Financial management (budgeting, audits, purchasing, oversight)						9
Personnel management						10
Roles and responsibilities of state and national association and partners						11
Policy development (includes annual and long range planning)						12
Ethics (including SC Ethics Act)						13
Proper procedure for meetings (parliamentary procedure)						14
Public and media relations						15
History of the conservation movement; local, state and national						16

# Attachment F

Criteria	Essential function		Value to customer		Aligns with goals		Total Score	Final Rank
Options:	.35		.35		.3			
Assessing issues	8	2.8	1	.35	4	1.2	4.35	3
Awareness of programs	7	2.45	2	.70	6	1.8	4.95	4
Duties and powers	1	.35	3	1.05	1	.30	1.7	1
Election/App process	3	1.05	15	5.25	9	2.7	9.0	9
Ethics	13	4.55	16	5.6	8	2.4	12.55	12 tie
Financial management	9	3.15	11	3.86	5	1.5	8.51	8
History of conservation	16	5.6	7	2.45	13	3.9	15.85	16
Laws, rules and regs	6	2.1	6	2.1	3	.9	5.1	5
Leadership	2	.7	9	3.15	11	3.3	7.15	6
Legal responsibilities	5	1.75	5	1.75	2	.6	4.10	2
Legislative process	4	1.4	12	4.2	7	2.1	7.7	7
Personnel management	10	3.5	13	4.55	14	4.2	12.25	12 tie
Policy development	12	4.2	4	1.4	12	3.6	9.2	10
Parliamentary procedure	14	4.9	14	4.9	16	4.8	14.6	15
Public relations	15	5.25	8	2.8	15	4.5	12.55	12 tie
Partners roles	11	3.85	10	3.5	10	3	10.35	11

**Attachment G**

**Conservation District Officials Training Program Survey by SCDNR**

State\_\_ tally \_\_\_\_\_

1. Does your state conduct a formal training program for Conservation District supervisors/commissioners?
  - a. Yes (18)
  - b. No (2)
  - c. Under construction (2)
2. If yes, are the supervisor/commissioners required to attend the training?
  - a. Yes (3)
  - b. No (12)
  - c. Appointed positions only (3)
  - d. Elected positions only
3. If the training is voluntary, what percentage of supervisors/commissioners do you estimate attend your training?
  - a. 75% or more (8)
  - b. 50-75% (2)
  - c. 25-50% (5)
  - d. Less than 25% (2)
4. Where is the training delivered? (more that one answer per state)
  - a. At local district board meetings (10)
  - b. At state, area, or regional meetings (14)
  - c. On the Internet (3)
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Who conducts the training? (more that one answer per state)
  - a. State agency (18)
  - b. State association of conservation districts (7)
  - c. Cooperative Extension Service (2)
  - d. College or university staff (other than Extension) (1)
  - e. NRCS (3)
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_
6. **Any other information or recommendations that you think may be useful.** Indiana allocates \$1500 per district for training; Delaware provides a training manual to new commissioners; West Va. to require elected commissioners to attend training.

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Thanks for answering these survey questions.